



Price, social life and proximity influence food choices: Engaging young people as co-researcher collaborators to better understand their surrounding school food environments

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Food environments around secondary schools are a strong influence on adolescents' food purchasing habits¹. We conducted a repeat cross-sectional study using Google Street View to examine school food environments in regional and metropolitan NSW, Australia over 17-years. Findings showed that unhealthful food outlets such as fast-food franchises, consistently dominated school food environments over 2007-2023. Increasing levels of poor nutrition among youth has been raised as a concern² by the Health Advisory Panel for Youth at the University of Sydney [HAPYUS] - an established group of 16 adolescents aged 13-18 years residing in NSW³. To gain further insight into the study findings and how it may impact adolescents' health, it is critical to include voices of adolescents in this research. The aim of this sub-study was to engage with members of our youth advisory group and conduct a consultation exercise on these study findings, drawing upon their lived experiences of school food environments. In Aug-2023, we engaged four youth advisors from HAPYUS. Study authors provided an overview of the study and its findings to the youth advisors via a Zoom call. Youth advisors formulated a 500-word statement on their perspectives and lived experiences of food environments surrounding their high schools over the subsequent 4 weeks. Adolescents agreed that physical proximity to unhealthy food outlets around schools was a key contributor to unhealthy eating habits however also recognised social and economic factors which play a significant role in shaping poor diets. The following quotes from their combined statement reflect social and economic concerns: i) "[We] observed on a daily basis young people were opting to travel to the closest food court for fast food, or **in some extreme cases**, even order fast food via a meal delivery app, to be delivered to the school - as opposed to choosing the closest outlet" ii) "Overpriced foods in schools with some drinks costing 2x more than a heavily discounted KFC meal, no meaningful difference between foods sold at canteens and those sold at fast food outlets - heavily processed, packaged snacks, pre-made reheated foods" iii) "Most unhealthy food outlets choose a location that is not only close to schools but also close to major shopping centres and food courts . . . ideal for an after-school social catchup as it appears to accommodate the needs of a large group of people." Consultation findings revealed the importance of social and economic factors that must be analysed in addition to adolescents' physical proximity to food outlets around their schools. Youth advisors call for governments to take immediate action to implement policies that ensure schools have cheap and healthy foods at canteens to mitigate against the purchase of foods from nearby unhealthy food outlets.

Keywords: food environment; adolescents; secondary schools; youth engagement

Ethics Declaration

No

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References

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